



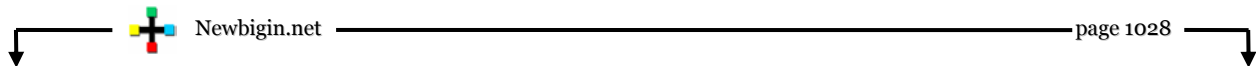
Union, Organic

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Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement (Nicholas Lossky, José Míguez Bonino, et al.; Geneva: WCC Publications): 1028-30.

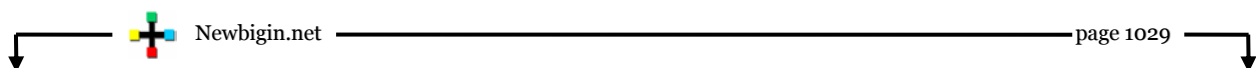
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As the Body of Christ, the church* is an organism "joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied when each part is working properly" (Eph. 4:16). Its unity* is therefore properly described as organic. All churches accept and use this biblical language with reference to their own inner life. The debate about organic union arises when churches seeking closer unity have differing views of the way in which unity and diversity are related to each other in the Body of Christ. Churches with similar polities have had little difficulty in entering into organic union. Scores of such intra-confessional unions have taken place in the present century.

The world missionary conference (Edinburgh 1910) debated the respective merits of organic and federal types of union and found strengths and weaknesses in both. Some delegates, notably Charles Brent, Episcopal bishop of the Philippines, were convinced that practical co-operation was not enough and that only a united church could offer a credible invitation to adherents of the great religions of the East. From his initiative came the first call for a world conference on Faith and Order,* and at the initial meeting of those churches which had responded to the call (New York 1913), it was agreed that "while organic unity is the ideal which all Christians should have in their thoughts and prayers", the immediate task was not to propose such unity but to explore patiently the reasons for disunity.

It was no accident that this initiative came from Anglican sources. The movement for co-



operation in missions had been, prior to 1910, an affair of Protestant churches of an evangelical persuasion, with the assumption that the questions of faith and order which divided their churches were of small account compared to the task of evangelism.* Anglicans of a Catholic churchmanship could not accept this assumption. As far back as 1870, the American Episcopalian W.R. Huntington had proposed a plan for organic union among the American churches on the basis of what was to become the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral:* scripture,* the ancient

creeds,* the sacraments* of baptism* and eucharist,* and the historic episcopate (see **episcopacy**). In the country of its origin this vision was to be swept aside by the federal ideas which were to lead to the creation of a council of churches (see **federalism**), but it provided the basis for the appeal to all Christian people issued by the Lambeth conference of 1920. The vision offered in this appeal was of "an outward, visible and united society, holding one faith, having its own recognized officers, using God-given means of grace, and inspiring all its members to the worldwide service of the kingdom of God".

This appeal and Anglican initiatives flowing from it occupied centre stage in unity discussions for the next 40 years. Its proposal of the historic episcopate as the visible centre around which unity could be restored was both its strength and the stone of stumbling for churches not episcopally ordered.

When the first world conference on F&O met in Lausanne in 1927, the only section which was not able to produce a report acceptable to the whole conference was section 7 on the unity of Christendom and the relation thereto of existing churches. Anglican members of the conference held that the report gave too much emphasis to co-operation in practical tasks and not enough to unity in faith and order. The second F&O conference (Edinburgh 1937) discussed the issue under the three headings: co-operative action, intercommunion,* and corporate union. The last is described as "the final goal" but also as the most difficult.

The formation of the WCC in 1948 created a new situation in which it became immediately necessary to assure member churches (esp. the Orthodox) that by joining the Council they had not committed themselves to any particular conception of union. This assurance was given in the Toronto statement* of the central committee (1950), which affirmed that the Council was a forum for the discussion of this question but did not prejudge the outcome. In the following decade there was intense discussion of the nature of the unity we seek, leading to the formulation of the New Delhi statement of 1961 (see **unity of "all in each place"**). This statement does not use the term but expresses what has generally been understood as "organic union". At no point before or after this has the WCC committed itself so explicitly to the goal of organic union.

But by the time this statement was made, changes were afoot which would alter the terms of debate. At New Delhi the Orthodox churches of the Eastern bloc, hitherto outside the Council, became full members exercising increasing influence in all its thinking. None of these had been involved in discussion of organic union with non-Orthodox churches. At the same time the Second Vatican Council* brought the Roman Catholic Church for the first time into full participation in the discussions of faith and order. Its immense influence, and its character as a single supranational church, shifted the focus away from local moves for organic union and towards the relations of the World Confessional Families with Rome and with one another. The suggestion of Cardinal Willebrands that the aim should not be organic union but rather the co-existence of different "types" of church life was widely canvassed (see *typos*).

In the ensuing years, while intra-confessional unions of an organic type continued to occur, the only area in which the Lambeth appeal led to organic union between episcopal and non-episcopal churches was the Indian sub-continent. Numerous attempts in other parts of the world failed. And (perhaps partly because of wider political changes) the Anglican communion no longer played the leading role in initiating moves for union which it had played earlier in the century. Moreover, movements in biblical scholarship eroded the assumption which lay behind the Lambeth appeal, namely that our task is to restore an original organic unity which has been lost. Much New Testament scholarship claims to show that such unity did not exist in the primitive church. And meanwhile the growth of para-church organizations and of church

base communities* in many parts of the world has strengthened the tendency to bypass the issues of faith and order which divide the great communions and to concentrate on practical issues of peace* and justice.* Organic union does not appear urgent.

It would seem, however, that as long as churches continue to use and to cherish the language of scripture about the Body of Christ, the issue of organic union can never be ignored. The periodic conferences of united and uniting churches* continue to bear witness to the fruitfulness of unions among churches of different polities. However difficult the way, it is hard to believe that anything can be the final goal except the organic unity of one body. But, as Stephen Neill remarks at the end of his survey of unions achieved and contemplated: "The final and terrible difficulty is that churches cannot unite unless they are willing to die" (*A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1948*, 495).

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